

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
February 9, 2009
7:00 P.M.**

MAYOR JEFFREY E. GRAHAM PRESIDING

PRESENT: COUNCIL MEMBER ROXANNE M. BURNS
 COUNCIL MEMBER PETER L. CLOUGH
 COUNCIL MEMBER JEFFREY M. SMITH
 MAYOR GRAHAM

ALSO PRESENT: CITY MANAGER MARY M. CORRIVEAU

ABSENT: COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH M. BUTLER JR.

Discussion Items:

2010 Revaluation –

Brian Phelps, City Assessor, reminded Council that he would like to get an idea of what direction they would like to go in regarding another revaluation and stated that the longer the City waits the more inequity is built into the system.

Mayor Graham asked if revaluations were done by an outside firm in years past.

Mr. Phelps said that firms are used more in townships.

Council Member Clough said that he questions the use of using an outside firm since the City staff really knows the City.

Mr. Phelps commented that the issue is not that an outside firm does not know the area, but rather that the City is already paying for that expertise with their staff.

Council Member Clough voiced his concern with the current real estate market and said he felt that it is easy to raise the assessments but questions whether it can as easily go the other way without an individual having to go in and challenge it.

Council Member Burns stated that she supports the revaluation occurring sooner rather than later and noted the importance of a yearly program. She added that she is in favor of having City staff do the work and not hiring an outside firm coming in as they are very costly. Council Member Burns also noted that the Jefferson County Real Property Tax Office could offer services.

Mayor Graham commented that if the equalization rate is 92.5% and everything is at that rate, if there could be some type of certainty that things would remain at one level.

Mr. Phelps replied that not all properties are at 92.5% as the residential class is 85% and the commercial class is 97%. He added that the state does not measure how accurate the classes are.

Mayor Graham asked if the revaluation would shift the burden of the levy to residential properties.

Mr. Phelps said that it would.

Council Member Burns said that the equalization rate affects exemptions.

Mayor Graham noted that a hodge-podge has been created with exemptions as two identical properties may pay different taxes. He asked how the revaluations are done each year.

Mr. Phelps said that revaluations occur when properties that have shown physical improvements. He added that the properties showing increases in values are not the most expensive homes but the more modest homes within the City.

Mayor Graham inquired if the County would be taking over this program.

Council Member Burns replied that that is not the case.

Council Member Clough asked for clarification.

Council Member Burns told Council that the County is not equipped with enough staff to take over the system but rather that the goal is to have a more equitable system county wide. She noted that with the possibility of consolidating smaller towns the County could contract with those towns to take over certain functions they are not equipped to cover.

Mr. Phelps told Council he is not recommending doing the program until 2011 at the earliest.

Council Member Clough commented that he feels the biggest problem with the old program is that people are still being revaluated.

Mr. Phelps said that residents are given notice about assessment changes.

Council Member Smith asked if assessments are currently being changed.

Mr. Phelps said that there were no neighborhoods that were very far off standards this year.

Mayor Graham asked if there have been many grievance calls regarding assessments.

Council Member Burns replied that a lot of people during the annual reassessment program ask “why me?” and told Council that she cannot support reenlisting in an annual program and suggested a cyclical review of homes in the City.

Mayor Graham asked Mr. Phelps how he does the revaluation.

Mr. Phelps told Council that some assessors have the ability to reevaluate a property just by looking at it. He noted that his office looks at the characteristics of the property and compares it to the information that is on file with his office. A model is derived by looking at sales in the neighborhood, he added. Mr. Phelps told Council that work would start in the summer of 2009 for completion by September of 2010.

Mayor Graham commented that the end result would be a set of values the state determines is 100%.

Council and staff discussed the revaluation schedule.

Mr. Phelps remarked that more funds will be spent during the revaluation process for overtime and mailings.

Mayor Graham asked for figures.

Mr. Phelps said that \$33,000 was spent in 2006-2007 and \$58,000 for 2008-2009 which shows that the City was getting back into the revaluation cycle. He noted that he hates to throw out the use of trending but admitted that it can be abused.

Mayor Graham asked what Council's desire is on the subject.

Council Member Burns said that she understands the need for a city wide revaluation and supports the assessment department for 2010-2011 program.

Mayor Graham inquired about overtime.

Mr. Phelps noted that it is hard to say at this point but someone would likely be hired for part-time work.

Council Member Burns asked if the City would be reimbursed from the State.

Mr. Phelps said that reimbursements amount to about \$42,000 per year. He suggested taking that investment and staying in the annual plan.

Mayor Graham asked about the certainty of continuing to receive \$5.00 per parcel from the state.

Mr. Phelps replied that there is some concern as there is currently a 2% cut in state expenditures.

Council Member Smith suggested doing the work over two summers then implement it the next year.

Council Member Clough stated he would support it again and that it makes sense to have some control to limit fluctuations.

Mayor Graham asked about implementing trending with the annual program.

Mr. Phelps replied that would be very unfair and that a 100% equalization rate would never be achieved.

Council Member Burns wished to verify if a city wide revaluation is done, then all properties would be looked at. She added that if the City opts into the annual program, then some neighborhoods would be looked at but not all. Council Member Burns noted that this is a concept that is hard to defend to taxpayers.

Mr. Phelps said that they will look statistically at all neighborhoods to see what will be changed.

Mrs. Corriveau asked Mr. Phelps if he could develop a mechanism to get back into the full revaluation cycle to get everyone valued during the same time frame and move from there.

Mr. Phelps stated that staff would look at doing a two year revaluation then in third year would get properties back on track to go into an annual program.

Council Member Burns asked if there would still be an incentive to do the revaluation if the money was not there.

Mr. Phelps replied that the incentive lowers the tax bill slightly.

Mayor Graham stated that the majority supports the idea of a city wide revaluation.

Assistance to Fire Fighters Grant – Fire Prevention and Safety Grant-

Chief Gaumont addressed Council regarding the Department of Homeland Security and FEMA grant application for the acquisition of resources associated with fire prevention. He noted that the fire department has received this grant two times in the last five years at a total cost of \$63,000, of which the city only had to pay ten percent.

Council Member Burns noted that the department has received alot of grant funding and asked if the grant applications are done by the Chief.

Chief Gaumont said that they are done by him. He then distributed handouts to Council illustrating the equipment being applied for with the grant. The Chief discussed the first item which is a Knox Box, used to house keys for entry to a building after hours should emergency situations arise. He noted that these are used by public buildings, schools, churches, businesses and private residences to avoid damage from forcible entry by firefighters in case of emergency. He added that the use of these vehicle safes will reduce the risk of keys being lost or stolen.

Council Member Burns asked about the cost of the box for the property owner.

Chief Gaumont replied that it costs \$189 for a three inch by three inch box. He added that only one box is needed per building.

Mayor Graham asked if the police department uses these as well.

Chief Gaumont said they do not and that the fire department will assist in gaining entry to an establishment.

Chief Gaumont reviewed the other items being applied for which include a new video library about fire prevention, fire hydrant markers and smoke alarms.

Council Member Smith inquired who is responsible for shoveling out the fire hydrants.

Mrs. Corriveau said it is the responsibility of the water department to shovel them out but the fire department has assisted.

Council Member Burns noted that most citizens are vigilant in keeping them clear but it has been a tough year to keep up with the snowfall.

Mayor Graham asked what Council's desire is for this grant.

Council agreed to apply for the grant.

Video Taping of Meetings-

Mr. White noted that there are different avenues Council could take with this topic which include retaining Mr. Weed's services for Council meetings and work sessions and using a single camera for other board meetings. He noted that a single camera could also be used for all meetings, including Council.

Mayor Graham asked if the regular Council meetings can be carried live and linked to the City's website.

Peter Keenan, IT Manager, noted that they can be carried live to a certain extent. He said that the bandwidth is not currently large enough to accommodate more than 50 viewers.

Mrs. Corriveau asked Mr. Weed if the live meetings are being sent to his local server and if it can be determined how many people are watching.

Mr. Weed said they are sent to the server in Seattle. He replied that the number of viewers can be monitored and that it is possible for the live feed to be linked to on other sites.

Council Member Burns asked if an individual can go to the City's website and watch the meetings.

Mr. Keenan said there is a link at the bottom of the City's homepage.

Mr. White noted the possibility for a complete archive of all meetings to be available on the City's website.

Council Member Smith mentioned purchasing one camera for work sessions and other board meetings and streaming that live, then archiving it for later use. He asked about the time frame it would take for that process.

Mr. Keenan said that one hour is an estimate and that he would need to take a look at technical issues and noted he has not taken an in-depth look at this yet.

Mrs. Corriveau reminded Council that every time Council is in session Mr. Weed is present.

Council Member Smith suggested mounting one camera in the Council Chambers for a single camera feed.

Mayor Graham commented that he is not sure there is a market for that much transparency in government and that he does not envision many people viewing these meetings.

Council Member Clough noted that there have been times where questions have arisen regarding different meetings and subject matter.

Mayor Graham noted that the assessment board of review and zoning board of appeals have a stenographer.

Council Member Clough replied that to some people these meetings are important and that with a single camera feed the meetings would be on the record.

Mayor Graham noted that the planning board meeting is a much more informal session.

Mr. White noted that the audio feed could be a factor since microphones will have to be used by all who speak at the meetings.

Mrs. Corriveau pointed out that there will be different people at every meeting so each time those present will have to be instructed on how to use the microphones.

Mayor Graham asked what the desire is of Council.

Council Member Smith said this proposal is more achievable and will not cost as much.

Mrs. Corriveau asked if a live feed is desired or simply having an archive on the City's website.

Council Member Smith replied that if a live feed is easy then that is what should be done, but only if it is not too time consuming.

Council Member Burns commented that Mr. Keenan just has a rough estimate on the amount of time it takes and suggested giving him a chance to get numbers on the actual cost and time frame.

Mayor Graham reiterated the consensus of Council to utilize Mr. Weed's services for Council meetings and work sessions and use one camera for other board meetings.

City Purchasing and Police Review-

Robert Cleaver, Purchasing Agent, addressed Council regarding the new purchasing policy for the City. He noted that it requires identification of individuals responsible for purchasing and their respective titles. Mr. Cleaver told Council that the City's purchasing policy has not been changed since its adoption in February of 1992.

Mrs. Corriveau said that there will also be some wording changes from the City Comptroller.

Mayor Graham asked what happens when Mr. Cleaver retires.

Mr. Cleaver replied that the new policy is to be updated every six months. He noted that any purchase over \$2,000 goes through the purchasing department but that blanket purchase orders are in place at various vendors throughout the City to be used when a department needs supplies. Mr. Cleaver also noted that the City shows no favoritism to any one vendor but that convenience plays a role in where supplies are purchased.

Council Member Clough inquired about the use of the City's credit card.

Mrs. Corriveau pointed out that ICMA dues are paid via credit card as well as the purchase of books, along with paying for continuing education. She added that at times those fees are paid by check.

Council Member Clough asked who has control of the credit card.

Mrs. Corriveau said it is kept in the Comptroller's vault and those who use it need to fill out various forms and return all purchase receipts. She noted that the card is paid off every month.

Reports for City Council Review:

New York State Real Property Tax Administration Improvement Grant Study-

Mrs. Corriveau said that this study was done in Jefferson County and it could have an impact on the City. She noted the importance of distributing this to Council.

Usage of Solar Panels in Municipalities-

Mrs. Corriveau noted that this was distributed by state auditors for capital budgeting and said this was more informational than anything.

Property Tax Monitor-

Mrs. Corriveau mentioned to Council that this publication comes out every month. She said page seven of the packet shows the videos available and suggested linking from the City's website to these videos as a service to the community.

Other Business-

City Clerk and City Manager Appraisals-

Mayor Graham asked Council to submit those as soon as possible so they can be compiled and reviewed before their adoption.

Mrs. Corriveau reminded Council that they are to be in by February 16 for adoption on March 2.

Deterioration of Pavers-

Mayor Graham noted that someone pointed out the deterioration of some of the red brick on public square.

Mrs. Corriveau said staff is keeping an eye on the bricks and asphalt which have been impacted by plowing. She noted there is some heaving between the YMCA and HSBC. Mrs. Corriveau also noted that in order to repair it the work will have to be hired out.

Council Member Clough asked about a warrantee.

Mrs. Corriveau said she does not know and noted that linear cracks have been spotted around the square including at the American Corner.

Parking on Square-

Mayor Graham told Council that Mrs. DeFranco had voiced concerns about parking places along the speed table by Avon Shoes.

Council Member Smith commented that there seems to be more parking available leading up to that point and that the signage is a bit confusing.

Mrs. Corriveau told Council that Mr. Hauk is looking into that and research is still being done on the area.

Executive Session-

Mrs. Corriveau requested that Council go into executive session to discuss valuation of real property.

MOTION WAS MADE BY COUNCIL MEMBER BURNS TO ADJOURN TO EXECUTIVE SESSION, MOTION WAS SECONDED BY COUNCIL MEMBER SMITH.

Council Member Clough suggested waiting until the next meeting so Mr. Butler could be present.

Mrs. Corriveau replied that it can wait until the next meeting.

MOTIONS WITHDRAWN.

Meeting ended at 8:48 p.m.

Amanda C. Lewis
Deputy City Clerk